INTRODUCTION

The articles presented in this volume constitute the written version of the papers presented during a symposium at the Institute of Latin American Studies at the Free University of Berlin in June 1988. It was certainly not foreseen that their publication would take so long, but now, on the 500th anniversary of what has been called the "Discovery of the New World", they acquire a new topical relevance. Strangely enough, there have been several attempts to redefine the term 'discovery', which indeed seems rather inappropriate, as an 'encounter'. It certainly was one, but this euphemism is apt to obscure the fact that the conditions as well as the intentions were not the same for the respective inhabitants of the three continents who met in the New World. The striving for domination and acqusition of riches was a purely European experience, and the racial and sociocultural theories of the 19th century, as well as the more recent views and aims of 'development', attempt to legitimate morally a situation established a long time ago: the supremacy of 'white' and European culture. In fact, its dominance and the advantages offered to those who accepted it were so overwhelming that it might seem surprising that alternative cultures were able to survive at all these 500 years.

Within this history of adaptation and cultural resistance, the Caribbean Islands constitute a particular case. First of all, they were the oldest and most intensive area of colonization, going so far as to substitute the original population by a more 'suitable' one. It was here where the more modern powers – England, France and the Netherlands – developed new concepts of rational exploitation of foreign lands for the sake of national development and where the bourgeois classes acquired the wealth and economic power which enabled them to overthrow the traditional feudal structures. The slave societies of the Caribbean, finally, offer a striking example – surprising to some sociologists[1] – of human communities which survived on the mere basis of conflict and force instead of consensus. Certainly, the geographic nature of islands plays an important part in this particular role of the Caribbean: their limited space can be easily controlled and subjected to the economic goals of colonization. There is little or no open space for frontier land to which alternative cultures may retreat in order to escape from a life totally dedicated to production.

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[1]See M.G. SMITH, *The Plural Society in the British West Indies*, Berkeley 1965, Introduction.

Thus, the plantation becomes an all-embracing "self-contained unit", a "total economic institution", as Karl Levitt and Lloyd Best put it.[2]

This lack of space, as well as the importation of an ethnically diverse African population, distinguish Caribbean alternative cultures from the indigenous cultures of the mainland. The development after emancipation, particularly the continuing economic dependence on and close cultural ties to the colonial powers, reinforced the specific traits of Caribbean culture which had been described as higly westernized, atomistic and poorly valued and, therefore, unstable and subject to erosion.[3] As we will see in the studies of the present volume, this characterization does not apply to all types of Caribbean culture. We may even presume that very often it is a secondary development due to modernization and urbanization, and even then it is often counter-balanced by movements which intend to recreate the social cohesion which had been lost in the urbanized cultures. The best known, but far from unique, example is the Rastafari movement.

Nevertheless, even the most rural and traditional Caribbean cultures are marked by a "socialized ambivalence", which Herskovits described as early as 1937, in his famous study on the peasant community of Mirebalais in Haiti.[4] This applies not only to the rapid shifts in attitudes and values according to the situation; it is also inherent to Caribbean cultural institutions themselves. The best known example is the syncretistic religions are marked by a double set of deities identified as 'African' and 'Christian'.[5] Under certain circumstances, the ceremonies, the consecration of priests, the social setting of the community may present itself either as more 'modern' and Christian, on the one hand, or more 'traditional' and African, on the other. Similar patterns appear in all aspects of social and cultural life, notably in the Creole language which allows for either a more 'European' variation and a more Creole one. This also pertains to the economic culture which, in subsistence oriented agricul-

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[2]Karl LEVITT / Lloyd BEST, "Character of Caribbean Economy", in George BECKFORD (ed.), *Caribbean Economy,* Mona/ Jamaica 1975, pp. 34-60.

[3]See Charles A. WAGLEY, "Plantation America: A Cultural Sphere", in Vera RUBIN (ed.), *Caribbean Studies: A Symposium,* Mona 1957; Sidney W. MINTZ, "The Caribbean as a Socio-Cultural Area", in M. HOROWITZ (ed.), *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean,* New York 1971; Jean BENOIST, *Les sociétés antillaises. Etudes anthropologiques,* Fonds St.Jacques / Canada 1975, among others.

[4]Melville HERSKOVITS, *Life in a Haitian Valley,* New York 1971 ([1]1937), p.299; see also Erika BOURGUIGNON, "Class Structure and Acculturation in Haiti", in *Ohio Journal of Science* 52 (1952), pp. 317-320.

[5]Obviously, the terms 'African' or 'Christian' do not always refer to a European or Western understanding of corresponding traditions, but to interpretations of these traditions within Caribbean culture.

ture and handicraft, as well as rural markets, shows a more Creole or, alternatively, more 'Western' variation; or the Caribbean matrifocal family structure, with its extended family and parenting system as opposed to the 'Western' nuclear family. Though all these features of Creole culture are still widespread, most Caribbean people agree that more modern variation is desirable and that they switch to it if they can afford it.[6]

Despite all these conspicious differences, the 'official' and the alternative variants of Caribbean culture are closely interlinked. This may be explained by the limited and narrow island and plantation space where these cultures had to exist. Thus they developed within the plantation and the colonized areas, and not on its outskirts, on the outlying and still free lands. In fact, subsistence economy, which is the extreme opposite of the prevailing export-oriented plantation economy, has its origin on the plantations themselves, where slaves were assigned a piece of marginal land where they had to grow provisions for their own subsistence. Creole languages proved to be a very flexible liguistic system which, at the same time, served as a communication vehicle between slaves of different ethnic origins and masters, but could also be spoken in a way that excluded unwanted listeners. Religious societies could appear either as a naive imitation of Christian belief or as a conspiration. Thus, Creole culture is hardly to be described as something constant; it is, in its different manifestations, part of a continous process which oscillates according to varying circumstances, between what is perceived as 'western' and modern, and what is perceived as traditional. Individuals, villages, regions and entire islands may shift towards the more 'western' orientation when the standard of living goes up, when schools give access to the official language, when the modern modes of living are widespread enough to make the 'superstitious' folk religion undesirable. But whenever communities are stagnating in isolation and poverty, Creole culture provides a network of institutions on which cultural communication and satisfaction of daily needs can rely. In this sense it is truly alternative.

The Berlin meeting was a very special event. Its financial and organizational framework was very limited and so it united mainly scholars from Germany and nearby countries who had been working – more or less regularly – in Caribbean studies. Though dispersed, both regionally and in their fields of studies, most knew each other. This created a cordial and relaxed atmosphere favoring true exchange regardless of rank and fame.

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[6]To 'afford' Western culture means that the entire socio-economic status of the person permits the entry into it: The salary must be regular and high enough for the husband to be able to substain wife and children, to buy modern goods in a supermarket etc.; if this were not the case, neighbours would accuse him of 'pretending' and would discriminate against him.

The most tangible result of the meeting was that participants decided to create a "Society for Caribbean Research" which should serve as a platform to maintain contact among all interested scholars and organizations, and which should regularly organize similar events. The second meeting in Vienna/Austria in June 1990, with many speakers from the Caribbean and North and South America, was just as pleasant and productive, but, due to overseas participation, it indeed had a different scope. The third meeting in Utrecht/Holland (1992) will confirm and further the international acceptance and viability of the associaction. Therefore, this introduction to out first Annals should conclude with our thanks to all the frieds who sacrificed time and money in order to sustain the society from its very beginnings.

Amongst the particular sponsors we would like to mention the Werner–Reimers–Foundation in Bad Homburg which, in offering its hospitality, enabled a group of Caribbean scholars to exchange ideas and, subsequently, to found the Society mentionned above. Particular thanks also go to Barbara Haeussinger, who accepted a lion's share of the organizational work during the conference; to Rafael Dumett and Jörg Schulze, who helped in the preparation of this manuscript; and last but not least, to Prof. Dietrich Briesemeister and Dr. Klaus Zimmermann, both of the Ibero–America Institute Berlin, for their willingness to accept this manuscript for publication within their Biblioteca Iberoamericana.

Giessen/Berlin
March 1992

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